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Attractiveness of WMD for Radical Islamist Movements: Ideological Constraints, Black-Spots, and Failed-Weak States

Strategic Insights, Volume VI, Issue 5 (August 2007)

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Strategic Insights is a bi-monthly electronic journal produced by the Center for Contemporary Conflict at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California. The views expressed here are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of NPS, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

Introduction

Five years after the 9/11 attacks which struck the heart of the western world, radical Islamist organizations remain the major threat facing the international security system. The operations conducted by the U.S. and its allies on the economic, political and operative level managed to inflict serious damage on these organizations—especially in the case of al-Qaeda—but still today we have to face an enemy which seems able to adapt to any scenario and that has, on several occasions, shown us that it is capable of acting on a global scale with exceptional effectiveness.

The effectiveness and the spectacular nature of the attacks carried out by these movements confirm the high operative level which radical Islamist organizations are able to achieve, but this aspect constitutes only a part of the general equation in which they are involved. Examining 9/11 and the major attacks carried out against western and western-related objectives since the beginning of the current struggle, what becomes immediately clear is the huge symbolic importance of the objectives chosen. In attacking New York, Madrid and London, the terrorists were conscious of the tremendous effects their actions would have had on the western economic, political and social system and of the fear they would have been able to spread among the populace. The radical Islamist leaders themselves have confirmed this several times:

"The events of Tuesday, September the 11th, in New York and Washington are great on all levels. Their repercussions are not over. Although the collapse of the twin towers is huge, but the events that followed, and I'm not just talking about the economic repercussions, those are continuing, the events that followed are dangerous and more enormous than the collapse of the towers. The values of this Western civilization under the leadership of America have been destroyed. Those awesome symbolic towers that speak of liberty, human rights, and humanity have been destroyed. They have gone up in smoke."^[1]

These considerations confirm the extensive knowledge these organizations possess of the western system and its vulnerabilities, which Islamist radical organizations have shown themselves capable of manipulating so as to paralyse the entire western system by the sheer terror their actions are aimed to inspire.

The underestimation of this fundamental aspect and the inability to acquire a similar level of knowledge of these realities are at the basis of the current impasse and they risk prolonging the struggle against radical Islamist organizations over the coming decades, transforming it from a battle against a limited fragment of the Islamic community to a true clash of civilizations.

In this context it is necessary to understand that the enemy is not represented only by Islamist radical organizations but also—and perhaps, above all—by Radical Islamism, which can no longer be considered a marginal Islamic current. Attacks against key figures, support structures and operative cells are clearly essential in the war against terrorism but cannot be considered the only solution to the problem. Relying only on the use of force means ignoring the pivotal role played by radical Islamist ideology, which is acquiring an increasing weight inside the Islamic community and helps such movements to survive the serious blows inflicted on them:

"By only attacking the terrorist cells that are planning and preparing attacks, you can never destroy a terrorist organization. Terrorists, especially the al Qaeda brand of terrorists, have a very high capacity for replenishing human losses. In order to fight terrorism, it is very important, in parallel with the strategy of targeting al Qaeda operation cells, to attack their ideological bases. If one only targets the operational infrastructure and does not target the ideological motivation, then certainly these organizations will survive. That means we will have to fight terrorism for another hundred years."^[2]

The old Sun-Tzu precept, which states that if you know your enemy and know yourself, you cannot be defeated, in this crucial moment holds truer than ever.^[3] Only understanding radical Islamist ideology and its strengths and weakness will we be able to win the war against terrorism, or—to put it better—the fight against the radicalism which is gradually growing within the Islamic world.

In this context, this article will focus on a particular issue indicated by several experts in the field as the next front in the current war against terrorism: the possible acquisition of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) by Islamist radical organizations.^[4]

Since the end of the past century, an understanding of radical Islamist organizations' true capacities and the growing awareness that the know-how, tools and components required to create WMD could be acquired by non-state elements have forced a growing number of experts to take into consideration the risk connected with the possible use of such weapons by groups of this kind. Due to the entity of such a threat and to the necessity of finding suitable and effective counterstrategies, several in-depth case studies and articles have analysed the possible sources of proliferation, terrorists movements' real capabilities with regard to WMD, their past attempts at gaining this objective and the different strategies they could use in order to obtain and employ these devices. However, these aspects constitute only a part of the equation WMD-Islamist radical organizations. It is, therefore, equally important to understand the role these weapons could play in the strategy of such groups and the existence of possible ideological-theological constraints on their use. We can no longer take as axiomatic the general assumption that, due to their particular ideological and structural conformation, Islamist radical organizations are less restrained than other movements as regards the actual use of WMD and that if they were able to acquire such weapons there would be no ideological-theological restraints to limit their actions:

"Conventional wisdom holds that organizations such as al-Qaeda cannot be deterred because they are not focused on self-preservation, do not value human life as most state leadership do, do not have territory over whose sovereignty they wish to preside, and live as parasites on relatively innocent bodies of host communities that cannot justly be targeted by massive military reprisal... However, this assumption should be questioned logically and empirically... Indeed, the most competent terrorist organizations, including al Qaeda and Hezbollah evince a strong commitment to justice, as they perceive it. Wanting others to see the justice of their cause requires some constraint on behaviour so

as to win sympathy with their constituencies and with those in the international community that they are trying to influence in what is a political-military struggle." [5]

The huge importance and the extreme complexity of the ideological-theological basis which supports the struggle carried out by radical Islamist organizations require serious efforts to be made to analyze them so as to find possible elements which can be used to prevent the acquisition and the use of WMD by such movements.

In this context this article will examine the role WMD could play in the strategy of radical Islamist organizations and the importance of the "ideological dimension" in their struggle. At the same time, it will examine another extremely important element: the "spatial dimension" of the threat outlined above—in other words—where these movements could acquire the know-how, tools and materials required for obtaining WMD and the role "black spots" and weak-failed States could play in this scenario.

Why WMD?

In order to avoid the threat represented by the acquisition of WMD by radical Islamist organizations it is necessary to understand why these movements—which through the use of "traditional" weapons have been able to inflict huge losses both in terms of human lives and economic-political consequences—are interested in WMD.

Two elements seem to be at the basis of such interest:

1. the sheer terror these devices are able to spread; and
2. the wide range of options possession of such weapons can guarantee and the particular status they provide.

Terror

The "invisible" nature of the threat represented by weapons of mass destruction and the perception that there exist no real measures capable of protecting a population against them make these tools ideal in the hands of terrorists, whose main goal is the disintegration of the political, economic and social structures of a world—the West—that they consider to be corrupt and corrupting. These weapons are the perfect choice for their campaign not only in terms of the damage they can inflict on the enemy, but—above all—in terms of the sheer terror they can create. In a scenario characterised by massive divergence on the level of power, therefore, the "strategy of terror" is the only option capable of inflicting serious damages on the enemy; and what damage could be worse than an entire society paralysed by the fear of a possible use of weapons of mass destruction?

The attack carried out by the Aum Shinrikyo sect on the Tokyo subway system in 1995 confirmed the exceptional efficacy of these weapons: even though the number of lives lost was relatively low (12 deaths, and 1030 people injured), the psychological impact was enormous and showed how the terror associated with these weapons goes far beyond the mere damage they can inflict on people and things.

WMD Related Benefits

The "terror factor" is not the only reason that could convince radical Islamist organizations to acquire WMD. The simple threat of using such devices could be an extremely valuable tool in terrorists' hands, giving them the chance to hold the entire international community hostage and, potentially, obtain military, political and economic concessions through extortion of this kind.

Moreover, the possession of such devices would reduce the existing gap between radical Islamist organizations and their enemies, limiting the divergence on the level of power, raising the status of these organizations and, consequently, increasing their weight and visibility in the international scenario. This last point, in particular, could represent a major gain for the cause of radical Islamist organizations, given the consequences for media coverage of their activities. The "propaganda factor" is, in fact, central to the strategy that current radical Islamist organizations have decided to adopt, and clearly differentiates them from the Islamist movements which fought "apostate regimes" during the last decades of the past century. These were unable to emerge from the media isolation in which the regimes they fought were able to keep them.

The rise of al-Qaeda marked, therefore, a fundamental turning point in this regard. Indicating the need to spread the radical Islamist message as one of the main pillars of the current struggle, Islamist leaders defined the "battle of ideas" and the role of the media as one of the most important battlefields, at least as important as the real battles fought by mujahideen and regular troops. In this context the messages sent to Al-Jazeera, the distribution throughout the Islamic community of audiocassettes and videotapes and the statements and different fatwas published on the web constitute an exceptional weapon capable of laying the base for the birth of new generations of fighters and of assessing important victories in the current struggle.

The Case of al-Qaeda

The importance of the "battle of ideas" and of the role played by ideology within the strategy of radical Islamist organizations can be more clearly understood if we examine the scenario in which such movements have to operate. In this respect, the current situation of al-Qaeda provides a fair picture of the importance of such an element. Since the end of the last century the propaganda factor has played a central role in al-Qaeda's strategy. Rohan Gunaratna, delineating the new al-Qaeda structure created in 1998, describes its main elements, stating that "immediately below the emir-general in al-Qaeda's structure stands the *shura majlis*, or consultative council... Immediately below the *shura majlis* and reporting to it are four operational committees: military; finance and business; *fatwa* and Islamic study; and media and publicity, which ensure the smooth day-to-day running of al-Qaeda, each being headed by an emir."[\[6\]](#)

The propaganda apparatus has always, therefore, been one of the most important elements of *al-Qaeda*, but nowadays, during a period of transition and change such as the one the organization is currently witnessing, its role has become fundamental. Operations conducted by the United States and its allies in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as on a global scale, have in fact succeeded in weakening greatly the movement's organisational network and wreaking serious damage on the "historical" chain of command which was formed and consolidated during the years passed in Afghanistan and Sudan. This has pushed the movement further and further towards a profound transformation, although it is difficult to say whether this has been expressly intended by its leaders or dictated by current contingencies. This has resulted in al-Qaeda shifting increasingly from a structured movement based around a united decision-making leadership towards a network of various organisations, working under the same banner but characterised by a large degree of autonomy, especially on the operational plane:

"Instead, we need to face up to the simple truth that Bin Laden, al-Zawahiri et al do not need to organise attacks directly. They merely need to wait for the message they have spread around the world to inspire others. Al-Qaeda is now an idea, not an organisation... autonomous cells carry out attacks on targets and at times of their own choosing, which are then applauded by al-Qaeda leaders of global infamy but limited practical ability to execute or organize strikes."[\[7\]](#)

Undoubtedly, the vision elaborated by Burke tends to underestimate the true capabilities of al-Qaeda—above all on the operative plane, considering the particularly loose structure of the

movement and the capacities of its core group which, though seriously damaged and weakened, survives and is still able to conceive, organize and carry out deadly blows against our societies—but it does provide a clear view of the situation in which the organization has to operate and of the challenges it has to face.

In this context, and in the absence of a “true” command group, the ideological basis has become one of the main factors of the movement's cohesion—the element which, together with charismatic leadership and common interests and objectives, has so far enabled the organisation to avoid collapsing under the weight of its different components and to sustain a specific operative direction. We clearly must not overestimate the importance of this ideological basis, which also continues to be a tool through which the leadership lends legitimacy to its actions and extends its network of contacts. However, given its central importance for al-Qaeda (whose “marketing” strategy depends on the high visibility guaranteed by the “brand”, offspring of Osama bin Laden and his message), any analysis attempting to furnish an adequate outline of the threat relating to WMD and radical Islamist organizations must include a study of these movements' ideologies and the existence of possible limitations to the use of such weapons.

Ideological-Theological Constraints

The general axiom with regard to the willingness of these organisations to employ WMD is that, usually coming under a charismatic leader or religious guide who determines the direction that the entire movement will take on the basis of needs and requirements that—to a certain extent—go beyond material reality, they are not limited in the same way as other groups such as separatist or independence movements which, instead, are accountable to their constituencies and therefore appear less inclined to use such weapons because of the negative impact this would have in the ranks of their sympathisers:

“These organizations [Radical Religious Fundamentalist Terrorists] are hierarchical in structure. The radical cleric provide interpretation of the religious text justifying violence, which is uncritically accepted by his ‘true believer’ followers; there is no ambivalence concerning use of violence that is religiously commanded.”[\[8\]](#)

This concept of “non-criticism” as applied to the followers of radical Islamist organisations cannot, however, be used in this precise case, since their message—with the exception of a few well-defined cases[\[9\]](#)—has never been aimed only at the organisations' own supporters, but directed towards the entire *ummah*. Such a claim, in fact, although applicable to a certain number of movements linked and wholly subjugated to the cult of a spiritual guide, cannot be extended to the entire spectrum of radical Islamist organisations. These operate in a highly complex context characterised by a series of interpretations, dogma and precepts, the violation of which—in the absence of any valid justification guaranteed by recognised religious authority and accepted by the populace—risks alienating the community from the cause of these movements and, thus, bringing about their inevitable defeat.

It is, therefore, essential that we examine the positions which have emerged in the Muslim world in relation to the possibility or otherwise of using weapons of mass destruction.

In this regard we must stress that, until few years ago, the only clear and unambiguous position was that assumed by the Ayatollah Khomeini who strongly condemned the use of such weapons. Whilst the doctrine for the Shi'a world has, therefore, been clearly stated, in Sunni contexts the question remains extremely complicated. This is a result of both the different concept of the religious scholar (not inserted into an organic, hierarchical structure such as exists in the Shi'a world and, therefore, far freer to assume an independent stance even in marked conflict with the principal religious institutions) and the risks connected with an eventual assumption of a position that could combat the interests of various state and non-state elements. Within such a context,

until a few years ago common opinion held that the acquisition and use of weapons of mass destruction could only occur for defensive reasons, and then only if there existed an enemy prepared to use such weapons against the Islamic community. The extremely cautious stance on this subject taken by *al-Qaeda*, compared to its usual *modus operandi*, must be seen in relation to that position. Although Osama bin Laden, in fact, has always shown great interest in acquiring weapons of mass destruction and, already in 1998, formally declared this interest, the main aim of *al-Qaeda*'s leadership—at least in the first stage—continued to be essentially defensive in nature and directed towards a credible deterrent to counter the arsenals of the 'infidels':

"Acquiring weapons for the defense of Muslims is a religious duty. If I indeed have acquired these weapons, then I thank God for enabling me to do so. And if I seek to acquire these weapons, I am carrying out a duty. It would be a sin for Muslims not to try to possess the weapons that would prevent the infidels from inflicting harm on Muslims."[\[10\]](#)

Furthermore, in the aftermath of the criticisms provoked by the attack on the Twin Towers regarding the violation of Islamic precepts that require an enemy to be forewarned of an attack and given the chance to convert, Bin Laden repeatedly exhorted the American people exercise their right to vote in order to change the policy adopted by their leaders and to embrace Islam:

"A message to the American people: Peace be upon those who follow the right path. I am an honest adviser to you. I urge you to seek the joy of life and the after life and to rid yourself of your dry, miserable, and spiritless materialistic existence. I urge you to become Muslims, for Islam calls for the principle of 'there is no God but Allah', and for justice and forbids injustice and criminality. I call on you to understand the lessons of the New York and Washington raids, which came in response to some of your previous crimes. The aggressor deserves punishment. We call you to Islam."[\[11\]](#)

"I will ask the American people to check the anti-Muslim policies of their government... They had described their government's policy against Vietnam as wrong. They should play the same role now that they played during the Vietnam War. The American people should prevent the killing of Muslims at the hands of their government."[\[12\]](#)

These appeals show, yet again, how it is essential for *al-Qaeda* not to violate universally recognised precepts of Islamic law and to avoid furnishing any pretext that could weaken its own message or erode the legitimacy of its actions. It is precisely from this viewpoint that the *fatwa* issued by Shayk Nasir bin Hamid al-Fahd in May 2003 acquires fundamental weight and impact.[\[13\]](#) This, in effect, declared the legitimacy of using weapons of mass destruction against enemies responsible for killing thousands of the faithful and against whom this kind of weapon represents the only possible means of achieving final victory, even though this could involve killing innocent Muslims too.[\[14\]](#) This *fatwa* could have enormous consequences: *al-Qaeda*—and radical Islamist organizations generally—now have a sentence permitting them to carry out attacks with WMD without the fear of criticism on the ideological or theological level, especially as no explicit, well-defined opinions to the contrary have been emitted.

Whilst this victory does not, in practical terms, move *al-Qaeda* any closer to its goal, on the theoretical level it would appear to have pushed the movement to abandon once and for all the doctrine that foresaw the use of such weapons purely for defensive purposes, as well as consolidating the leadership's preference for preventive attacks against the western world.

The Spatial Dimension: Black-Spots and Failed-Weak States

In the last few years there have been numerous reports on the acquisition of weapons of mass destruction by radical Islamist movements, but it is still today extremely difficult to determine the

true capabilities of these organizations. Most analysts agree, however, that although such organizations have repeatedly attempted to obtain these weapons, there are to date no conclusive factors indicating that they have succeeded in this. Various elements suggest that al-Qaeda has managed to make contact with some experts in the field and procure a number of basic components, but the difficulties involved in producing such weapons and the strong pressure which the organisation has come under have prevented them from actually acquiring WMD.

One of the main obstacles encountered so far by these movements has undoubtedly been the lack of a site at which to set up production of the weapons as well as access to the necessary know-how, materials and tools required to achieve their aim. The elimination of the Afghan refugee was, in fact, a serious blow to al-Qaeda, which had established a series of research installations in the country.

The spatial question, therefore, is of vital importance to the organization's potential for obtaining weapons of mass destruction, and has been an underlying factor in the military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan. The current international scenario and severe instability reigning in various parts of the world, furnish organisations seeking to acquire these weapons with a range of alternatives. Amongst these a primary role could be played by those areas commonly called "black-spots" and, more generally, by the so-called Weak-Failed States which possess the structures and personnel that could be used for obtaining WMD. Stanislawski defines "black-spots" as those places in which:

"transnational criminal and terrorist organizations come together... These are areas which are characterized by weak state structures and high levels of corruption providing a lawless and relatively sovereignty-free environment; they are generally in the vicinity of an international border or borders so that individuals can move easily across jurisdictions... One such black spot is the area around the Pakistani city of Peshawar... This is the region which has been repeatedly described as the hiding place for fleeing or regrouping al-Qaeda and Taliban operatives; the area is also a smuggling center where almost anything can be bought or sold on the black market. Another such spot is the area around the Paraguayan city of Ciudad del Este where the borders of Argentina, Paraguay, and Brazil come together... Some other known black spots in the world beside the two mentioned above are the Darien jungle on the border between Colombia and Panama, the Chiquibil Reserve cutting across Belize and Guatemala, the Akwesasne Mohawk Territory that crosses the border between the U.S. and Canada, the Bekka Valley in Lebanon, the Pankisi Gorge between Georgia and Chechnya, and the Fergana Valley in Uzbekistan."[\[15\]](#)

The seat of the principal illicit trafficking networks operating on an international scale, black-spots could provide the perfect sites for organisations interested in obtaining weapons of mass destruction. Cooperation with these networks would, in fact, guarantee radical Islamist organisations access to the material, equipment and know-how that it is otherwise difficult to acquire, as well as the freedom of action required for developing their programmes. As Stanislawski stresses, these areas have already been used in the past as bases and training camps for radical Islamist movements, as in the case of the area around Ciudad del Este (Hezbollah) and that around the city of Peshawar, with a long-standing presence of cells linked to al-Qaeda and to the Taleban.

The second option is that of the Weak-Failed states, equipped with installations related to the production of WMD. Limited territorial control by central authorities would guarantee these movements the freedom of action they require, allowing them to set up training camps, to fill their ranks drawing from the large mass of people disillusioned with the existing regimes, to organize a series of activities aimed at providing economic support for their struggle (smuggling, illicit weapons trade, drugs trafficking...) and to take advantage of the international status of weak-

failed states: "Despite their internal decay and instability, failed states retain the outward instruments of sovereignty such as diplomatic recognition and membership in the United Nations and protection under its charter. These diplomatic realities can serve as severe impediments to counter-terrorist operations, particularly in cross-border operations to eliminate terrorist networks." [16] Above all, these particular types of states could provide access to research centres and plants, thus making it easier for radical Islamist organizations both to acquire components and tools and to co-opt scientists and experts whose knowledge is fundamental to the success of any project.

Especially after the operations held in Afghanistan and Iraq it is unlikely that any government would willingly host such organisations on its territory, fearing that these could seriously threaten their authority from within and that there could be reactions and attacks from without. However, the limited resources at their disposition together with corruption at high levels could limit their capabilities and thus result in radical Islamist movements enjoying safe and protected bases, which would, in turn, greatly increase their chances of their activities being successful.

The current international scenario presents a series of potentially ideal candidates for organizations interested in acquiring NBCR: the former Soviet Republics of Central Asia, the south-east Asian region and a large part of Africa—to mention only the primary and better-known examples—are all characterised by the presence of notable sections of the population which, as a result of religious or other ties, could lend their support to these movements, and which all have to face the challenge of strong internal splits.

Conclusions

The WMD-radical Islamist organization combination represents an extremely serious and complicated threat, involving complex and differing dynamics and themes. As indicated in this article, the elements of space and ideology play a major and determining role in the "strategy of terror".

The freedom of action and movement enjoyed by al-Qaeda and its sister organizations in the fields of ideology and propaganda can no longer be tolerated. In this respect, the continuing silence of the main Sunni religious institutions regarding the legitimacy or otherwise of using NBCR for terrorist purposes can only play into the hands of radical Islamic organisations. It is, therefore, necessary to initiate a serious debate aimed at rejecting the theses propounded by sheikh al-Fahd and his supporters, a debate that must not be limited to the sphere of scholars of Islamic law but which must be communicated—by extensive media coverage and in such a manner that the population at large can easily comprehend its main aspects—so that the propaganda apparatus of al-Qaeda finds itself facing an adversary capable of employing its own weapons.

At the same time, the question of the "spatial dimension" related to the threat of WMD—radical Islamist organisations requires a decisive and incisive approach. Today, with the free movement of goods, ideas and people, there are no longer any peripheral areas whose internal conditions we can afford to ignore. In order to combat the threat outlined above, it is essential that intelligence activity be stepped up to prevent terrorists from finding safe havens in which they can make contacts, conduct transactions and develop their programmes undisturbed. Cooperation must be enhanced with states considered at risk, assisting their internal growth and the strengthening of their central authorities' control over their territories, but also making it very clear what risks they would be running should there be collusion or minimal opposition on their part to radical Islamic organizations operating within their borders. Lastly, regional initiatives should be developed aimed at improving the system of controlling the import/export of sensitive materials and instruments so as to limit the risk of NBCR smuggling.

About the Author

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